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ABSTRACT

The reading habits by which students formulate a critical analysis of a literary work should focus attention on the choices that a writer makes when putting words on paper. These choices include sound, diction, language, imagery, organization, metaphors, sentence structure, transitions, allusions, and patterns. Discussing these choices does not exclude the consideration of ideas; the understanding of a writer's careful language choices makes ideas clear for the readers. Investing students' time in attending to an author's language usage is more profitable than spending time to indulge opinions of what students like and do not like. For students who have not learned to see the craft that is on the page, this type of analysis is more practical than a lecture about the specific literary period or the author's personal life at the time the literary work was created. It gives students a consistent set of questions that makes them aware of language, the writer's tool. When students learn to analyze the language of the text as the writer's craft, they have not only an appreciation of the complexities and beauties of the language, but also a better understanding of what the writer said. They have learned to see more than reflections of themselves and they have sharpened their literary tastes with a specific analytical method. (RL)

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PROGRESS OF A YOUNG READER

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PROGRESS OF A YOUNG READER

When I met Ms. Koltiska, I was impressed by her enthusiasm. She was typical of the students I encounter—ready to dig in at the beginning of a semester. And her approach to literature was typical; she had apparently been encouraged to talk about literature in two general ways: 1) as a reflection of herself, her ideas, her tastes, and 2) as a reflection of the author's life and times.

Although both of those approaches require certain reading skills, I think the first is too narrow and the second is too broad. I never begin a literature class by asking students whether or not they liked what they read, but, no matter—Ms. Koltiska, like one hundred other students, responded to my first questions with, "I didn't like that." Students usually like what is familiar, or what agrees with them or with their notions of what the world ought to be. To encourage students to limit their perceptions and tastes by tolerating that typical answer is to constrict their reading skills. The second approach is too broad for young college students because it requires information, some of it quite sophisticated, that these students have not had time to acquire. They rarely have the background necessary to understand or discuss a piece of literature in its historical, psychological, or literary context; furthermore, they are frequently misled by the sociological and/or historic information or misinformation they have—misled into seeing a piece of literature only as the writer's response to what she had for breakfast or only as reaction to the sun's rising or only as polemics.

We can avoid the limitations of the first approach and the boundless, shifting ground of the second by teaching students to see and evaluate what is on the page, not what may have been behind the door, at the pulpit, in the bloodstream, or under the bed. Certainly we must teach them to see beyond their necessarily limited personal tastes. Since I teach at a junior college and, in the American Literature survey course, deal mainly with sophomores, I will limit my discussion to sophomores although I think it pertains to freshmen as well. I argue that the best service we can offer in freshman and sophomore literature courses is to teach students to pay close attention to textual detail--organization, patterns of repetition, word choices, allusions, figurative language, imagery. If we consistently emphasize the writer's choices with language, we help students, whether they are English majors, biology majors, or business majors, to build workable, practical reading skills that allow them to deal confidently and critically with any literature.

Let me be specific. When Ms. Koltiska came to class she had all the enthusiasm an instructor could hope for and she was bright. She responded to what she read and was anxious to talk about it. But no matter what question I asked the first two days of class, her response was, "I didn't like today's reading." What she didn't like was the Puritans. Few students do. They do not like the Puritan world view and they are not familiar with history, sermons, religious poetry as literary forms. Had I allowed Ms. Koltiska to continue to respond only to the writer's ideas in relation to her own, I think she would have lost her enthusiasm before we got to the Enlightenment.

In the first couple of class meetings, I establish the main

line we will follow, the two general questions we will consider. 1) What did the writer say? 2) How did he say it? The first question actually is the less important to me for class discussions and we give most of our time to the second which includes specific points such as diction, images, arrangement of parts, sound, metaphors, sentence structures, transitions, allusions, patterns--in short, the choices a writer makes when he puts words on paper. Discussing these choices does not exclude considering ideas; in fact, it allows us to go directly into them with a firm understanding that a writer's careful language makes his ideas clear for a reader. The main advantage, though, is that students know, from one assignment to the next, what to pay attention to as they read; they have a consistent approach that allows them to get into a piece of literature and to discuss specific devices and techniques. Because this method is so specific, before long it makes answering the first question easy since students come to the end of the reading with a whole lot more than a vague feeling about what the author was doing. If structure and sense work together, paying attention to the specifics of craft makes it easier to pay attention to theme.

By the time we got to Jonathan Edwards in the second week of the semester, Ms. Koltiska was establishing some reading habits that very quickly turned her attention away from her opinions and herself. She began to like what she read, not because she agreed with the ideas but because she could appreciate craft in the writing. There is no way Ms. Koltiska or any other student is going to like "Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God" for what it says and little chance that they'd have enough knowledge of history or of literature to let them see that

sermon as a reflection of the Great Awakening or as a classic of its literary form. But they can certainly read for the kinds of details I've mentioned and they enjoy that--partly because the method is new to them, partly because they learn, reading that way.

Ms. Koltiska, whose eyes literally brighten and widen when she discovers deeper reading levels, opened our discussion of "Sinners" by saying that the sermon is scary. With that response to what she had read, she had taken a big step toward reading maturity, as far as I was concerned, and her next comments confirmed my judgment. She said, "Edwards uses images that would scare his listeners to death. He says that man is a worm, or a spider, or a loathsome insect, and that God will crush out man's blood." That was a good place to begin the discussion; other students remembered other images and metaphors. They were especially struck by the images of God's wrath held back like water behind a dam and by the arrows of death. Someone remarked that Edwards uses the spider and worm and water images each two or three times. Another student thought that one of the most vivid images was the picture of the pit of Hell over which man walks on a rotten cover that might drop him at his next step.

I asked the class what else they found frightening in the sermon. "He makes it so personal," someone said. How? We began talking about Edwards' shift to direct address in the "Application" section. That led us to a careful look at several sentences in which Edwards uses "you"; "...if God should let you go, you would immediately sink...and your own care and prudence...would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of Hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a

falling rock."[1] "...'tis nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment: tis to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to Hell the last night..." (p. 106). Here, Ms. Koltiska's eyes widened--she must have been reading a phrase or two ahead--and when we got to the end of the sentence, she was bursting with her comment that Edwards is not only speaking right to us, he is organizing the sentence to make us think we might die and go to Hell even before we hear the end of the sentence. "...no other reason...why you have not dropped into Hell since you arose in the morning...no other reason...why you have not gone to Hell since you have sat here...this very moment...." (pp.106-107).

I intended to have the class consider organization and this was a good time to turn to it. The three section overall organization is fairly obvious, but we spent a few minutes talking about the reasons and the effects of seeing first the elucidation of text, next the doctrine, and finally the application. When I asked specific questions about the internal organization of each main section, though, the class had to pay closer attention and they discovered things about arrangement and audience. Doing that, they were learning to ask themselves, as they read, the kinds of questions about craft that we would consider all semester, and I think, the kinds of questions that can give them a way into any literature they encounter. The most obvious internal organization device

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[1]Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners In the Hands of An Angry God," THE AMERICAN TRADITION IN LITERATURE, vol. I, ed. Bradley, Beatty, Long, Perkins, (p. 105). Subsequent quotations are from this volume.

Edwards uses is numbers. He enumerates four items in the elucidation, ten considerations in the explanation of doctrine, four in the application. With a little push, my class looked deeper than the numbers and discovered that Edwards also builds each list in increments, with repeated key terms, as a crescendo. In the third section, for example, Edwards tells us to consider 1) "Whose wrath it is" (p. 107), 2) " 'Tis the fierceness of his wrath" (p. 107), 3) "The misery you are exposed to is that which God will inflict...that he might shew what that wrath of Jehova is" (p. 109), and 4) " 'Tis everlasting wrath" (p. 110). When they look at that section, students can see that a listening audience, the primary audience for a sermon, can easily follow numbers, that repetition and increments keep a listening audience on track, that rising intensity builds emotional response.

I asked the class if they had noticed sound and the fact that diction regulates pace. I pointed out some examples: "...all that preserves natural men every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted unobliged forbearance of an incensed God" (p. 104). I asked a student to read that line aloud as rapidly as she could. Before she could get started she laughed and then explained--there is no way to read the line rapidly because there are too many sounds in "uncovenanted" and there is too much meaning in "forbearance of an incensed God." The class recalled examples of repeated consonant sounds, and a student read this line aloud: "...if God should only withdraw his hand from the flood-gate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath would rush forth with inconceivable fury..." (pp. 105-106). The end of "if" and the initial f in seven words regulated the student's

reading pace and it was apparent to everyone that Edwards had chosen those words for their sounds as well as for their meaning. It was also apparent to everyone that in the discussion there was no time and no reason to lug in opinions.

Because readers are so apt to be overwhelmed by the wrath and hell fires of Edwards' sermon, I asked my students how many times Edwards does, in fact, offer his audience compassion and a chance to be saved. At least ten times, Edwards presents that opportunity; if we ask students to be watchful, they can see the balance and the pattern. My students searched out statements like these: "Till he believes in Christ: (p. 104), "here you are...in the house of God and have an opportunity to obtain salvation" (p. 111), "Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open" (p. 111). The last page of the sermon is a neat balance of Hell and Happiness juxtaposed, a pattern my class had not noticed. But once they saw it, we could move quite naturally into the ideas of the sermon because the students had got rid of their original lopsided view of it. Edwards does more than threaten and damn. My students were able to see the whole idea instead of only the scary half of it <u>because</u> they were encouraged to look at what is on the page, to read carefully and to discuss specifically.

Investing students' time in the way I've just described is more profitable than giving that time to indulge opinions of what students like and don't like, and for students who haven't learned to see the craft that is on the page, it is more practical than a lecture about the Great Awakening, or Calvinism, or Edwards' interest in smallpox innoculation because it gives students a consistent set of questions and it makes them aware of language, the writer's tool.

A day or two after the "Sinners" discussion, Ms. Koltiska came to my office to talk about William Bradford's OF PLIMOUTH PLANTATION. She said that because she was noticing allusions, deliberate repetitions of sounds, and paired synonyms, and was thinking about organization, she was reading slowly. She wondered if that careful reading would ever become easy. I assured her that it would, but I warned her that she would soon be dissatisfied with writing that did not give her several devices to look at. She smiled and said, "Well, it is fun this way. There's so much more to see than I thought there was." Then she asked about Bradford's pattern of juxtaposing two events—the death of the proud and profane sailor, and the rescue of Separatist John Howland, for example. We talked about it for only a few minutes when she figured out that Bradford was using the pattern itself to illustrate his idea that God was protecting the Pilgrims.

I design the essay examinations to cover exactly the kinds of points Ms. Koltiska was talking about. The examination over the early writers has questions like these: 1) Discuss in detail any one of the literary devices Bradford uses in OF PLIMOUTH PLANTATION to make his style appealing to an audience. 2) By discussing either the organization or the diction of Edwards' "Sinners In the Hands of An Angry God," evaluate the sermon according to the Puritan literary standard of clarity.

As the semester went on, Ms. Koltiska and the rest of the class continued to look for, to discuss and to write about writers' methods. We talked, for example, about Franklin's puns, Jefferson's dignified diction in the Declaration of Independence, Hawthorne's color images and ambiguities, Melville's Biblical allusions in BILLY BUDD, the bilevel

structure of WALDEN. Then late in the semester Ms. Koltiska came to my office to announce that some books are better than others, deeper, more challenging. Just for pleasure she was reading THE HORROR OF AMITYVILLE, and even though it had vivid images, she said, there wasn't much else to keep her interested.

In addition to learning to read, Ms. Koltiska was learning to write, and her final essay was a pleasing illustration that one skill improves another. We talked about her final essay before she wrote the exam; more than just to get an answer down, she wanted to write it well. The question she answered was this: By discussing the work of one representative author from each era of American Literature (Puritan, Age of Enlightenment, Romantic, Transcendental, and Late Romantic), show that literature is the "miracle" Thoreau speaks of in WALDEN--"Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?" She tried some of the language devices she had been seeing all semester; she used balanced, parallel sentences and she sustained a metaphor of struggle through the essay to focus several different kinds of examples on her thesis which was,

> Literature is a miracle which allows us to experience things and times which would be impossible to do without literature. We may not be able to live during the different American literature eras, but through reading Bradford, Franklin, Poe, Emerson, and Lincoln we can experience the fighting that each man was doing for a cause important to that era.

The essay's specific development was a combination of the craft and the ideas of those writers named in the thesis. For example, the section on Lincoln began.

> Lincoln was a fighter too, but a fighter politically to save the Union. In his "Reply to Horace Greeley" he

> repeatedly uses the terms "save the Union" and "help the cause." He catches his listeners and readers up in the passionate plea to hold together the Union.

The section on Poe began, "Poe was fighting for something different than Franklin was in his literature. The Romantic writers were fighting to get away from reading and writing for learning to reading and writing for pleasure."

Ms. Koltiska did not mature overnight as a reader, but she did take big steps quickly. Because she did, she was a delight to teach. Because she was enthusiastic and vocal, she often told me about her progress as a reader. But otherwise, Ms. Koltiska is like most sophomores I have run into; they do not have these specific reading skills and they are happy to learn them. When students learn to look for pattern, sound, arrangement--when they learn to see the language of the text and the writer's craft, they have not only an appreciation of the complexities and beauties of the language, but a better understanding of what the writer said. Whether those students are science, business, or arts majors, they have learned to see more than reflections of themselves and they have sharpened their tastes. Students like Ms. Koltiska have learned one useful critical approach to any literature they encounter. They can read confidently and evaluate critically even an unfamiliar piece of literature because they have a specific method. I think it is our responsibility to give students at least that.